

MODERN AGE

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Hero-Worship in Retrospect— An Editorial

THE SECOND AND CONCLUDING part of Professor Robert Nisbet's "Roosevelt and Stalin" gives added dimension and distinction to this issue of *Modern Age*. One who reads and reflects on this essay in its totality—and particularly one who has lived through the dark years in which the epochal actions and decisions that Nisbet assesses took place—cannot ignore the censorial judgments that the essay presents. Even liberal diehards should be hard pressed to rebut Nisbet's diagnosis of events and personalities that have made a permanent imprint on the process of modern civilization. In particular we are also reminded of how the quality of political leadership affects universal history. Clearly, what Nisbet reveals is that an intrinsic rhythm of disintegration was to identify the consequences of the kind of working relation that Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Josef Stalin developed. No two leaders did more to restructure the postwar world than did Roosevelt and Stalin. As both witnesses to and legatees of the unusual relationship of these two men, who held in their hands the fate of humanity for a crucial period of time, we can hardly minimize the momentous outcome of that relationship. Its political repercussions no less than its historical psychology and sociology are nothing less than astonishing.

One's evaluative response to "Roosevelt and Stalin" should give some sort of index to one's willingness to aspire to a deeper awareness of political conditions that in the end assume transcendent moral meaning and validity. For many senior readers of *Modern Age*, Nisbet's essay should excite remembrance of things past. And for younger readers born after World War II, "Roosevelt and Stalin" should help provide historical circumspection that encourages the kind of probative understanding (and humility) that the lessons of history impart to those who live in the postmodern climate in which an insidious revisionism and relativism combine to foment the ahistorical, nonhistorical, and antihistorical attitudes that pervade the intellectual community in its present deconstructionist phase. These attitudes, however, are blasted by the explosive power of Nisbet's case against Roosevelt and by his rigorously sustained argument that the President's "political courtship" of Stalin reached its height first at the conference at Teheran in 1943 and then at Yalta in 1945. "Teheran was in a sense Stalin's Munich," Nisbet writes,

“as Munich was Hitler’s Teheran.” No statement better illustrates the enduring truth of the comment written somewhere that one thought fills immensity! For what happened in the compound of the Russian embassy in Teheran had immeasurable effects that Nisbet estimates with candor and discrimination.

I myself find Nisbet’s arguments irreproachable, painfully so. The adverbial addendum at the end of the preceding sentence has for me a deeply personal significance, for as a child of the thirties who had witnessed the impact of the Great Depression, which to Americans was as traumatic an experience as the Great War was to European man, Roosevelt was my hero, and one whom my imagination has not ever fully been able to replace. As a boy of twelve years of age, I was among the thousands who awaited with infinite excitement Roosevelt’s “whistle-stop” appearances in the 1944 campaign when his train was passing through the small industrial city in southwestern Massachusetts in which I lived. Some school friends and I even made some crude placards endorsing him in his bid against Thomas E. Dewey for a fourth term. I can visualize fully the moment on a crisp autumn day when he emerged from his private car to address briefly a huge crowd awaiting him from below a railroad overpass. Though I do not recall his words, I do recall his luminous presence as I looked up in wonder at the white-haired man, now larger than life, ablaze with heroic stature and dignity, and as he in turn gazed down at and spoke to us—paternally, confidently, reassuringly.

Roosevelt exuded a kind of nobility that no other statesman has for me ever equalled. In him my hero-worship reached its pinnacle. All those virtues that encompass the highest standards of statesmanship—certainty, constancy, sincerity, fortitude, magnanimity—acquired in his presence, on that occasion far away and long ago, a sacrosanctness that I have never forgotten. If ever I revered any leader as much, it was Roosevelt, who appeared to many of us as a hero at what was truly an epiphanous time in history. The passage of more than four decades fails to lessen the aural and visual inspirations of that day in a New England city on the bank of the Connecticut River when one came to greet the President of the United States. Somehow even the war itself seemed an insignificant historical fact compared to the greatness of that moment as it mysteriously possessed the innocence of my psyche. “The heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic,” as Emerson observes in his “Heroism.”

The Roosevelt myth was always to be powerful and inviolate. When I chanced to come across a campaign picture depicting FDR behind bars in a prison cell, bearing the caption “Where he belongs!” I was horrified. Roosevelt, it seems, was once to me what Charles Stewart Parnell, the “uncrowned King of Ireland,” was to James Joyce. When he died, I wept bitter tears, thinking in despair that the world had lost its greatest beacon of hope. That spring afternoon when the startling announcement of his death came over the radio was, I vividly remember, fragrant and sunny, but for me it was cold and dreary. (Indeed, the only poem I ever wrote in my life was an elegy on the President’s death on April 12, 1945.) His death marked the death of an era and I feared somehow for the safety of my world. My mother was much more practical in consoling me. “This, too, will pass,” she said. “The world will go on, new leaders will come as they always have come.” And, of course, Harry S. Truman did succeed FDR. In fact, in 1944, I also went to the railway depot to meet the Democratic vice presidential candidate who was then campaigning in Massachusetts. “What a friendly, dapper little man,” I thought to myself as he shook my hand firmly and eagerly—dazzled as I was by political potentates. But “the man from Missouri,” I also told myself, was no Roosevelt! Later it was my mother, again, who remarked that it was far better to have a Truman than a quixotic Henry A. Wallace as Roosevelt’s successor. And history itself was to attest to the appropriateness of this remark.

In time the gradual demythologizing of Roosevelt and the examples of cruel history were to teach me truths that cut to the bone. By the mid-fifties, which saw the brutal Sovietization of large parts of the world, I had grudgingly come to realize that there was a distinct

difference between greatness and mere power. But even that realization, in its disillusioning context, pained me sharply. To this very day there is not a photograph of FDR that does not stir profoundly my nostalgia, my adolescent dreams and hopes—those reveries that, I now well know, are filled treacherously with the romance of lies. But it is always difficult for enthusiasts like my former self, stamped deeply by early life-experiences and the perennial dream of a “brave new world,” to rid ourselves completely of enchanting myths and ideals, or to forget our heroes even when they have, as we must finally learn to our sorrow, feet of clay.

To this day no other human voice has the capacity to stir me as much, in its singularly inspirational quality and conveyed confidence, as did Roosevelt’s. His “fireside chats” echo in the depths of my consciousness, and I can still envision myself expectantly huddled with neighbors and members of my family in front of a small radio listening to each word dropping mellifluously from Roosevelt’s mouth. As a speaker he was for many of us a modern Chrysostom. Even now I can hear his voice from across the grave in Hyde Park speaking *to me* as no other American leader’s voice has ever spoken to me. And I can still travel back, effortlessly and shamelessly, to the Roosevelt era, hoping to discover some lost inspiration, some exhilarating moment frozen in time, some far-off “shining city” in which to see, to hear again, my great political hero. My early reverence for and my later disenchantment with Roosevelt, I have to confess, were never to be altogether commensurate in their emotional intensity. Hero-worship, as Thomas Carlyle tells us, “becomes a fact inexpressibly precious. . . . The certainty of Heroes being sent us; our faculty, our necessity, to reverence Heroes when sent: it shines like a polestar through smoke-clouds, dust-clouds, and all manner of down-rushing and conflagration.”

These autobiographical retrospections are sparked by Nisbet’s “Roosevelt and Stalin.” I record them here in order to emphasize the persuasive power and urgency of Nisbet’s essay as it diagnoses and corrects the history of the relations between two wartime leaders, their grim meaning and results in our time and for all time. In the end, I find, no amount of hero-worship can blind us to those truths and data that liberate us from the nets of romantic attitudes and illusions. For that which violates the rational sequence of cause and effect is always in need of attention. We need, above all, to recall the lasting results of what Roosevelt and Stalin brought about. We need, that is, to confront head-on issues that our liberal-progressive intellectuals and millenarian opinion-makers would have us ignore or observe through rose-colored glasses.

What makes Nisbet’s “Roosevelt and Stalin” so pertinent in its scrutiny of matters of first importance is that it not only pushes aside the veil of illusion that often belongs to romantic attitudes and habits, but also shatters the hagiographic liberal myths that have collected around Roosevelt’s persona and policies. Nisbet’s critique of Roosevelt’s courtship of Stalin speaks for itself as we look backward and forward since the 1940s: “. . . it was Teheran, not the later Yalta, that was the setting of the Cold War.” Thus, to glance at events in Poland in recent years is to return to the Teheran where FDR did little or nothing to block tyrannous Soviet plans for that unfortunate country.

An absolutely amazing mixture of megalomania, haughtiness, adventurism, illusion, naiveté, and ignorance, as Nisbet demonstrates, identified Roosevelt’s attitude toward the Soviet leader. “I tell you that I can personally handle Stalin better than either your Foreign Office or my State Department,” Roosevelt unabashedly wrote to Churchill on March 18, 1942. That boast never subsided. Nor did his appeasement of Stalin. Clearly, in FDR there was no real awareness of what the Marxist Revolution and its extermination machine in Russia were all about. In their own special way Teheran and Yalta were to become symbols of betrayal in a world in which, as John Paul cogently put it before he became Pope, “falsity and hypocrisy reign supreme, public opinion is manipulated, consciences are bludgeoned, apostasy is sometimes imposed by force, and there is organized persecution of the faith.” Unconscionably impervious to, if not incapable of, a

metaphysical conception of the inward crisis of modernity, FDR affirmed the spirit of Rousseau in his view of the Communist East as fallow ground for the enactment of political and economic reform.

It is a pity that Roosevelt could never have read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First Circle* (1968). Solzhenitsyn's extraordinary portrayal of Stalin as he appears at the age of seventy in 1949—"Growing old like a dog. An old age without friends. An old age without love. An old age without faith. An old age without desire."—unmasks the satanic nature of Stalin as well as the evils of monolithic Stalinism. *The First Circle* would have enabled Roosevelt to enter that most frightening of metaphysical, or ideological, hells. There he would have encountered the "seminarist-careerist" who, as Vladislav Krasnov has noted in his book on *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky* (1980), "chose a more ambitious path, the path of atheism and revolution, and eventually became the 'sole and infallible' pontiff of world Communism." For Stalin, as one dissident commentator has stated, the word "soul" itself connoted something anti-Soviet. An exemplar of "men who have forgotten God," Stalin was verily a Man-God and Devil whom a vain and self-deceiving Roosevelt presumed he could mold into yet another New Dealer in a Soviet marshal's uniform!

In his dealings with Stalin, no less than in his general understanding of foreign affairs, Roosevelt disclosed alarming deficiencies that must inevitably diminish our view of him as a great man of politics and war. His behavior at Teheran and Yalta had an unfortunate aftermath. In this connection, it is surprising that Roosevelt's appeasement of Stalin is yet to be perceived on the same level as Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler. But, then, Roosevelt was a clever publicist and coordinator of myths, and also something of a medicine man, unlike Chamberlain, whose intellectual coldness and lack of demagoguery have always worked against him and have stereotyped him as a dour, ineffectual leader.

The wartime encounters between a patrician American President and a revolutionary Russian dictator have continuing reverberations that liberal apologists cannot easily eradicate. To look at the map of Europe today, and indeed at the map of the world, is to be reminded precisely of what happened when Roosevelt and Stalin joined to transform the geography of twentieth-century society and in turn the geography of the world-soul itself. For those who have the courage to judge sociopolitical happenings and geopolitical movements of history, spiritual and political interdependencies are inescapable. Only when modern man accepts this consummate fact of human existence can he acquire the vision and the wisdom belonging to those whom Irving Babbitt calls the "keen-sighted few," that minority of excellence to which the ancient Hellenes gave the title of *aristoi*.

Nisbet underlines the relevance of Jacob Burckhardt's belief that a leader with "crazy and heartless optimism as to human nature" simply has "no comprehension of the type of mind which cares only for power and thinks only in terms of power." The picture of Roosevelt that Nisbet illuminates is of one who suffers from an abysmal confusion that, as the great Swiss historian of the nineteenth century observed with prophetic insight in his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (1905; *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, 1943), characterizes "good, splendid, liberal people who do not quite know the boundaries of right and wrong and where the duty of resistance and defense begins."

"Roosevelt and Stalin" recreates events of unique historical significance, it penetrates human folly and dreams, it destroys historical fantasies, it returns us to a time that absorbs our time, it enables us to discern man in history and history in man. But beyond these critical distinctions, the essay has transhistorical and transdisciplinary values that affect the right conduct of mind in detecting the ingredients of an adulterative romanticism in an age dominated by liberal ideology: the power of illusion, the lure of myth, the

decline of spiritual principles, the worship of false gods, the unchecked growth of critical gnosticisms, the attraction of unreal quests, the promotion of personality.

Refuting tendencies that circumscribe the demonic element in life demands intellectual and spiritual ardor and respect for a transcendent moral order. Finally, in helping us to stare into chaos, Nisbet underlines abiding historical truths that a Burckhardt grasps when he expresses reverence for “the survival of the human spirit, which in the end presents itself to us as the life of *one* human being. That life, as it becomes self-conscious *in* and *through* history, cannot fail in time so to fascinate the gaze of the thinking man, and the study of it so to engage his power, that the ideas of fortune and misfortune inevitably fade.”

— *George A. Panichas*

Roosevelt and Stalin (II)

Robert Nisbet

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S World War II courtship of Stalin reached its heights, as I have indicated, in the two summit meetings at Teheran and Yalta. At the first, during the course of three private talks with Stalin from which Churchill was excluded, FDR made clear that he would go along with Stalin's territorial desires in Eastern Europe and assured Stalin also that America would put up little if any protest over annexation of the Baltic states. He also gave his personal assurances of a rich reward in the Far East for Russia for its agreement to join in the war against Japan once Hitler was defeated.

Yalta added little of actual substance to Teheran. What Yalta did give Stalin was not East European territory, which he had already taken by force during the months following Teheran, but, equally important, all the documentary materials of a justification of Stalin's military aggressions in the whole of Eastern Europe. As Chester Wilmut pointed out more than thirty years ago in his path-breaking *The Struggle for Europe*, the real crime of Yalta was the moral cloak it gave Stalin for all the heinous depredations upon Poland and other Eastern states—starting with the pact with Hitler, including the Katyn Forest slaughter of many thousands of Polish officers, and continuing down to the cruel and blatant perfidy of the Soviets in the tragic Warsaw Uprising of August 1944—and for all that he would subsequently do by ruthless aggression first in the Far East and then in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Declaration on

Liberated Europe, perhaps the greatest single piece of duplicity in World War II, carrying, alas, Churchill's as well as Roosevelt's and Stalin's names, was all Stalin needed to undergird a foreign policy and military strategy that reaches down to the present moment. With its calculated ambiguities covering such matters as human rights, democracy, and peace, the declaration read as if it had been written by Lenin and Stalin for the official Soviet canon. Needless to say, this fact did not prevent Roosevelt, upon his return from Yalta, from celebrating Yalta as a setting worthy of comparison to Philadelphia and the signing of the Constitution. Churchill was scarcely better.

But the saga of Roosevelt's courtship of Stalin is by no means confined to the Teheran and Yalta summits. There is no want of other, separate and distinct, demonstrations of ardor toward Stalin. There was Roosevelt's sudden gift—without any prior notification of Churchill—of one-third of the Italian navy to Stalin. All Stalin had asked for at Teheran was a loan of half a dozen ships for use in northern and southern waters. Churchill was thunderstruck when word of FDR's public announcement reached him in London, and he was quick to refuse his assent. But he was equally quick to take steps that would save FDR from a potentially embarrassing, even explosive, situation. Churchill's superior wisdom had once again come to the rescue.

Another incident that reveals Roosevelt's alacrity in accepting of Stalin's